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ABSTRACT

In this study, 375 adolescents from the junior high and high school of a Midwestern, semi-rural community were surveyed to investigate: (1) developmental and gender differences in strategies that adolescents use to cope with family, school, and peer stressors; and (2) the relation between coping strategies and outcome. The students were divided into three age groups and completed the Coping Responses Inventory -- Youth Form three separate times for each of three stressors that the adolescents themselves generated from the domains of family, school, and peer stressors. Subjects also rated how upsetting each stressor was perceived to be and how whether the stressor was perceived to be controllable. Results indicated that: (1) adolescents use more avoidance than approach coping strategies for family stressors and more approach than avoidance coping strategies for peer stressors; (2) the use of approach coping strategies increased from 7th to 12th grade for family and school stressors; (3) females used more of both approach and avoidance coping strategies across stressors; and (4) regardless of the type of stressor, approach coping strategies predicted more favorable outcomes and avoidance coping strategies predicted more unfavorable outcomes. (RB)

Adolescent Coping with Family, School, and Peer Stressors

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This research is based upon results from the doctoral dissertation of the first author.

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Abstract

This study investigated: 1) developmental and gender differences in strategies that adolescents use to cope with family, school, and peer stressors; and 2) the relation between coping strategies and outcome. Results indicated that: 1) adolescents use more avoidance than approach coping strategies for family stressors and more approach than avoidance coping strategies for peer stressors; 2) the use of approach coping strategies increased from 7th - 12th grade for family and school stressors; 3) females used more of both approach and avoidance coping strategies across stressors; and 4) regardless of the type of stressor, approach coping strategies predicted more favorable outcomes and avoidance coping strategies predicted more unfavorable outcomes.

Adolescence is often described as a critical developmental period given the many social, psychological, and biological changes occurring simultaneously (Petersen, 1988). Researchers have highlighted the need for a greater understanding of how adolescents cope with stressors because the development of adaptive coping strategies during adolescence may lay the foundation for successful adaptation in adulthood (e.g., Compas, 1987). Although no coping strategy is always good or bad, what appears to be important is the match between the demands of the situation and the coping strategy utilized (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For adolescents, family-, school-, and peer-related problems are typically found to be important domains of stressors (Omizo, Omizo, & Suzuki, 1988). In the adolescent literature, there has been little attempt to investigate the match between the type of stressor (family, school, peer) and the type of coping strategy (e.g., approach versus avoidance). This literature has also not addressed how coping strategies may develop and change during adolescence.

The first goal of the present study was to determine whether adolescents' use of coping strategies depended on the type of stressor experienced (i.e., family, school, or peer stressor), and the age and gender of the adolescent. A second goal of the study was to examine how coping efforts (approach versus avoidance strategies) in response to various stressors might be differentially related to outcome (i.e., how the event turned out and the adolescent's anxiety).

Method

Subjects and Procedures

A total of 375 adolescents from the junior high and high school of a midwestern, semi-rural community participated in the study. To assess developmental differences, adolescents were divided into three groups based on grade level: early adolescents (grade 7; $\underline{n}$ = 148), middle

adolescents (grade 9; n = 124), and late adolescents (grade 12; n = 103). Subjects were asked to provide demographic information including their gender, age, grade level, race, grade point average (GPA), and parents' marital, educational, and occupational statuses. Subjects then completed the Coping Responses Inventory - Youth Form (CRI-Y; Moos, 1990) three separate times for each of three stressors that the adolescents themselves generated from the domains of family, school, and peer stressors. The CRI-Y is based on an approach (towards the stressor) / avoidance (away from the stressor) framework for coping. Within this two-dimensional framework coping may be either cognitive or behavioral. Subjects also rated how "upsetting" each stressor was perceived to be and whether the stressor was perceived to be controllable (i.e., preventable). Lastly, two indices to assess the outcome of coping efforts were completed: 1) a specific outcome measure assessing the adolescent's perception of how the particular stressor turned out, and 2) a more general index of outcome, the adolescent's state anxiety (Spielberger). (Coefficient alphas for measures in this study ranged from .76 to .91). The measures were administered in group sessions and all measures were completed anonymously.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

Coping scale factor analyses. Factor analyses were completed to determine relevant factors of coping for the entire sample of adolescents for each of the three stressors. Following Moos (1990), a two-factor solution was examined on the CRI-Y to determine whether a legitimate distinction between approach and avoidance coping strategies in fact existed. Overall, general support was found for the approach/avoidance distinction, with the exception of one 6-

item subscale from the avoidance factor (Alternative Reward - e.g., "get involved in new activities") which consistently loaded on the approach factor.

Relation between demographic variables and major study variables. Zero-order correlations revealed that the higher the level of upset over the stressor, the more the adolescent used both approach and avoidance coping strategies and reported higher levels of anxiety. As such, level of upset was included in subsequent analyses as a covariate. Other background variables were not significantly correlated with coping strategies or outcome.

Descriptive Differences in Adolescents' Coping Strategies Across Stressors

Analyses were conducted to determine whether utilization of coping strategies depended on the type of stressor (i.e., family, school, peer), grade level, and gender. Repeated measures ANOVAs, with two between-subjects, or grouping factors (grade level and gender) and one within-subjects, or trial factor, (coping - approach and avoidance) were computed for each of the three stressors.

Utilization of coping strategies across stressors. Significant main effects for coping strategies were found on family stressors ($F(1,352) = 10.61$, $p<.01$) and peer stressors ($F(1,319) = 5.41$, $p<.05$) (see Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of these results). For family stressors, avoidance coping strategies were used more often than approach strategies. This finding for family stressors may reflect the perception that family stressors are more difficult for adolescents to negotiate than the other types of stressors. For peer stressors, approach strategies were used more often than avoidance coping and may reflect peer relationships being seen as more egalitarian than other types of relationships (e.g., with family members or at school), thus enabling the adolescent to use more active coping strategies. Overall, then, some support was found for

cross-situational variability in adolescent coping, which is consistent with other studies (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Compas, Malcarne, & Fondacaro, 1988).

Although there were no significant coping X gender effects, females reported using more of both types of coping strategies (approach and avoidance) for both family (F (1,351)= 19.39, $p<.01$) and peer stressors (F (1, 318)= 7.13, $p<.01$).

Developmental trends in adolescents' coping strategies. Significant coping X grade level effects were found for family ($F(2,352)= 2.98$, $p<.05$) and for school stressors ($F(2,334)= 3.50$, $p<.01$) (see Figure 2 for a depiction of results for family stressors). Specifically, the use of approach coping increased relative to avoidance coping from the 7th to the 12th grade for family and school stressors, but not for peer stressors. These findings may reflect changes in cognitive capacity influencing changes in coping behavior. For example, it may be that the development of abstract thinking in older adolescents may facilitate more effective problem-solving coping strategies. To date, the existing literature that has examined developmental differences in coping during adolescence have not considered the type of stressor involved. It is important to note that this study's findings regarding developmental differences are based on a cross-sectional design, and thus may not reflect actual developmental changes in the use of coping over time. Research examining developmental trends using a longitudinal design would certainly add to this area of research.

The Relation Between Coping Strategies and Outcome

The second area of interest in this study examined the relation between coping strategies for each type of stressor and an index of the outcome for that stressor, as well as a general index of adjustment. Separate sets of hierarchical regression equations were computed for each of the

three stressors (family, peer, school). In each set of equations, two specific equations were computed, one predicting the domain specific index of outcome (outcome of coping for that particular stressor), and one predicting the general index of adjustment (state anxiety).

Table 1 shows that approach coping strategies predicted positive outcomes for each stressor and lower levels of anxiety, and avoidance strategies predicted negative outcomes for each stressor and higher levels of anxiety. Thus, the type of stressor was not really central. This indicates that coping strategies may serve either as a risk factor or a protective factor in terms of being related to an index of psychological distress. Table 1 also shows that when the outcome of the specific stressor was used as the criterion variable, coping strategies used for that stressor accounted for much more variance compared to when the more global outcome index, state anxiety, was used as the criterion measure (e.g., 22% versus 5% for family stressors). Previous coping research has tended to mix the level of analysis, relying on situation-specific coping measures, but global measures of outcome and psychological adjustment (e.g., Compas et al., 1988). Although common in coping research, this methodology fails to examine how the individual perceives his or her coping efforts to be successful in response to that particular stressor.

Although not shown on Table 1, the interaction terms of grade level X coping strategy and perceived controllability over the stressor X coping strategy, entered in a third step in each equation, generally failed to predict outcome. This suggests that regardless of age or perceived contollablility over the stressor, approach coping strategies predict positive outcome and avoidance coping strategies predict negative outcome.

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Table 1

Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Stressor Outcome and Anxiety from Background Variables and Coping Strategies

	Outcome		Anxiety	
	R^2	beta (step)	R^2	beta (step)
Family stressors				
Step 1: Background variables	.10		.06	
Gender[a]		.07		.05
Grade[b]		.24**		-.06
Upset[c]		-.20**		.22**
Control-prevent[d]		-.06		.02
	F (4,320) = 8.62**		F (4,325) = 4.93**	
Step 2: Coping	.22		.05	
Approach		.51**		-.12*
Avoidance		-.34**		.24**
	F (2,318) = 52.78**		F (2,323) = 8.34**	
School stressors				
Step 1: Background variables	.03		.05	
Gender[a]		.11		.11*
Grade[b]		.12*		-.05
Upset[c]		.03		.06
Control-Prevent[d]		-.07		.16**
	F (4,308) = 2.72*		F (4,308) = 4.00**	
Step 2: Coping	.13		.06	
Approach		.42**		-.15*
Avoidance		-.24**		.29**
	F (2,306) = 23.79**		F (2,306) = 11.57**	
Peer stressors				
Step 1: Background variables	.07		.07	
Gender[a]		.06		.08
Grade[b]		.26**		-.10
Upset[c]		-.08		.23**
Control-prevent[d]		-.01		.01
	F (4,290) = 5.60**		F (4,300) = 5.90**	
Step 2: Coping	.14		.05	
Approach		.47**		-.22**
Avoidance		-.30**		.27**
	F (2,288) = 25.26**		F (2,298) = 8.38**	

Note. Reported F values are for the individual step in each analysis.

[a] Gender was coded as follows: 1 = males, 2 = females. [b] Grade was coded as follows: 1 = 7th, 2 = 9th, 3 = 12th. [c] Higher scores indicate higher levels of upsettingness over the stressor. [d] Control was coded as follows: 1 = preventable, 2 = unpreventable.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

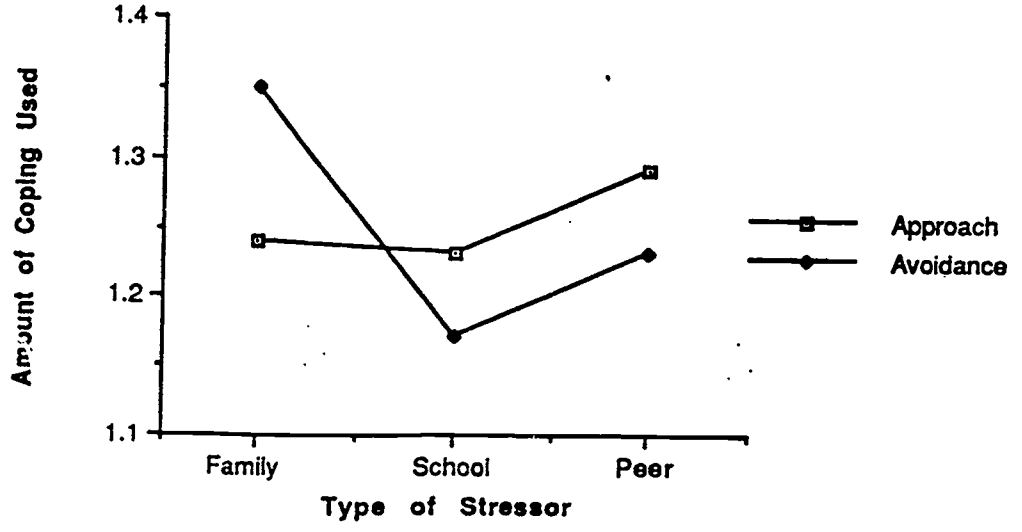

Figure 1. Interaction between type of stressor and approach/avoidance coping strategies.

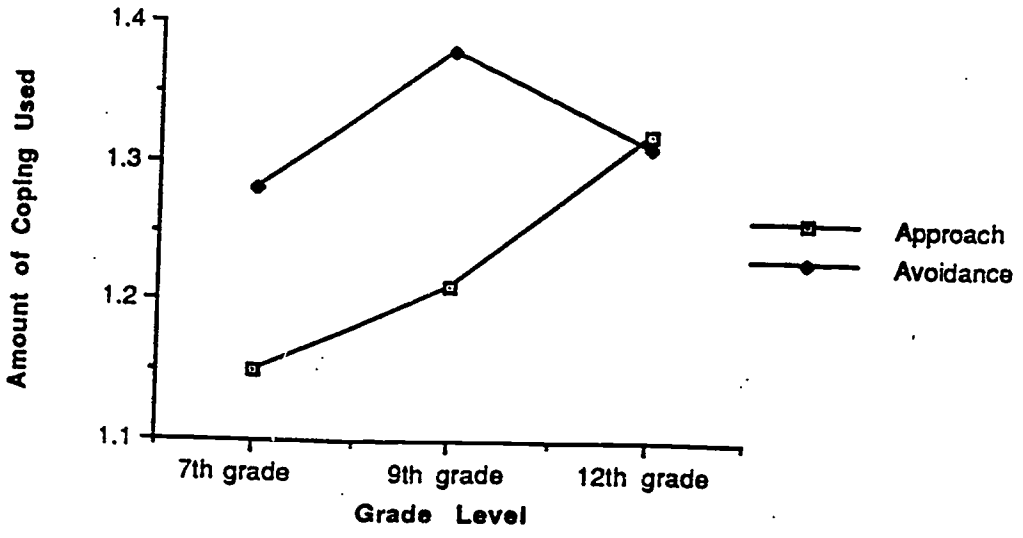

Figure 2. Interaction between grade level and approach/avoidance coping strategies for family stressors.